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RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 1068
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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PREL PGOV SNAR PE
SUBJECT: EMBASSY GETS TO KNOW COCALERO LEADER AND PRO-COCA
MAYORS

REF: A. 2006 LIMA 4766

- 1B. 2006 LIMA 3823
- 1C. 2006 LIMA 2927
- 1D. 2005 LIMA 4441
- 1E. 2003 LIMA 1098

Sensitive But Unclassified, Please Handle Accordingly.

Summary

11. (SBU) Post hosted 48 cocalero (i.e., coca-producer) leaders on 1/18, including seven mayors and Nelson Palomino, secretary general for a large cocalero federation. The

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cocaleros main assertions were: extreme poverty plagues their communities and coca is one of their few profitable agricultural commodities; foreign aid has been poorly managed in the field; municipalities, not NGOs, should be the development implementers; and cocaleros are not narcotraffickers. Palomino and his group took a more moderate stance than expected with us, GOP officials, and the press, but given his past radical, pro-coca and anti-U.S. statements, it is doubtful this will stick. End Summary.

Palomino and friends

12. (U) Nelson Palomino, Secretary General of the Confederation of Agricultural Producers of Coca-Growing Valleys (CONPACCP), led a delegation of seven pro-coca mayors, an indigenous (Ashaninka) representative, and over 35 cocaleros (coca producers) in a meeting with Embassy staff on 1/18. (Note: Palomino was released from prison in 2006 after serving three years of a 10-year sentence for inciting violence, kidnapping and other crimes during cocalero protests. Despite prohibitions on political activity he led a pro-coca political movement that won 17 mayor seats in the VRAE this past November. End Note) The representatives came from the Apurimac and Ene River Valley (VRAE) and requested a meeting with the Embassy during their 2-day trip to Lima to meet with GOP officials on the VRAE Plan (ref A). This was the first encounter with Palomino in over five years (Palomino met once with Embassy staff in 2001-2002 before his prison sentence.) He reportedly harbors ambitions for political office, and hopes to harvest the disenfranchised to achieve this. (Ref B, C)

Moderated message?

13. (U) The cocaleros emphasized the need to "eradicate extreme poverty" (not mentioning the need to eradicate coca) in the region and to increase their income opportunities. They downplayed their standard coca industrialization and decriminalization rhetoric, but still drew distinctions between coca and cocaine and coca farmers and narcotraffickers. Palomino said he would support a gradual reduction in coca if other crops were profitable. Following a USAID presentation of past VRAE Alternative Development projects, Palomino acknowledged U.S. investment and good will, but opined the money was mismanaged and wasted on projects that were "over-valued and poorly constructed." With seven mayors from his pro-coca party listening, he asserted that municipalities, not NGO's, should implement development projects. (Note: In the last 3 years USAID has invested over \$7.8 million USD in the VRAE and continues to work in 65 VRAE communities. Security risk and coca replanting are specific challenges in the region. End Note.) Emboffs emphasized that coca cultivation retards economic development and that a successful counternarcotics program requires eradication, interdiction, and alternative development.

Atmospherics

14. (SBU) The tone of the meeting was friendly and civil. Palomino's group was mostly rural farmers (campesinos), informally dressed, with no ties to be seen. They were disciplined, and Palomino maintained order. During the meeting he used hand gestures to tell people when to stand and sit. Though he showed a degree of respect and deference to the mayors, he was clearly in charge and emphasized that they were campesinos and cocalero leaders before being elected. To set himself apart from the other speakers,

Palomino stood up from the table to speak for about 15 minutes, much longer than anyone else. He is a skilled orator who spoke without notes. After the meeting, the cocaleros individually expressed their appreciation to Embassy staff for the meeting.

Comment

15. (SBU) We chose to meet with Palomino, his mayors, and cocalero leaders to hear first-hand their message, see how they operate, and reach out to a group that expressed interest in dialogue but has consistently opposed our counter-narcotics program. Palomino's message was more conciliatory than expected, and he expressed a desire to work with us to foment economic development and reduce poverty. This is in sharp contrast with his past rhetoric opposing U.S. and GOP counter-narcotics programs and demonizing the U.S. Palomino's moderate stance may well be a political ruse. He has been an advocate of increased coca production in the VRAE, an area where over 97 percent of the coca goes to narcotrafficking, and has actively undermined GOP and U.S. counternarcotics efforts in the region. Despite this, the meeting was a first step in what could be a longer-term dialogue with an active and sometimes hostile sector. End Comment.

POWERS